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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000341

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SUBJECT: EU ENVOY FOR BURMA MAKES LITTLE HEADWAY WITH THAIS

REF: 07 BANGKOK 5620

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The RTG had little to offer the EU Special Envoy for Burma, who in turn presented no details or clarifications on what he thought the region should do about Burma. While he met with a wide cross section of actors that focus on Burma, including NGOs, ASEAN diplomats, and members of the UN family, Piero Fassino remained in listening mode for most of his meetings. His statements to the press repeated much of the rhetoric he has used before, namely that opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi should be freed from house arrest and that the Burmese regime should begin inclusive dialogue aimed at national reconciliation. Overall, the visit did not generate any major breakthroughs, though Fassino was limited by the fact that Thailand's recently elected government has yet to make known its position on Burma. Fassino indicated that he would return to Bangkok in March to meet the newly appointed Foreign Minister and Thai government "Burma Team."
END SUMMARY.

MFA MEETING A WASH FOR BOTH SIDES

¶2. (C) During his January 29-30 stop in Bangkok on his regional tour to drum up support for a political solution in

Burma, EU Special Envoy for Burma Piero Fassino met with outgoing Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsonggram. Their thirty minute conversation proved disappointing for both sides, according to French Deputy Chief of Mission Pascal Ledeunff and Thai MFA Burma Desk Officer Jirusaya Birananda, who spoke with us after the meeting. According to our contacts, Fassino walked out frustrated with Thailand's continued inaction on Burma, and Nitya left with a sense that the EU envoy did not appreciate Thailand's position.

13. (C) Ledeunff explained that Fassino passed a clear message to the Thais: Burma remained high on the EU agenda. His appointment as Special Envoy for Burma was designed to support the efforts of the UN's Ibrahim Gambari, with whom he described having a good working relationship. Fassino described sanctions as only part of the EU strategy for Burma, and emphasized that "they are a tool, not a goal." He encouraged the Thais to work with other countries in the region to develop a strategy that balanced their concern for stability in Burma with the calls for human rights and democracy coming from the international community.

14. (C) Meanwhile, Jirusaya stated that Nitya, accompanied by the MFA's leading expert on Burma, Kallayana Vipattipumiprates, bristled at Fassino's implication that Thailand had not done enough on Burma. Nitya defended the Thai position and explained to Fassino that the RTG had engaged the Burmese government for the past forty years. While Nitya agreed that the status quo was not acceptable, he believed that there still existed room for cooperation with the Burmese government. Nitya pressed Fassino for clarification about what the EU expected the RTG to do about Burma, to which Fassino had no clear response. Jirusaya explained that the Thais had expected more from the EU envoy.

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15. (C) Both diplomats agreed on the importance of continued support for Gambari's efforts. Nitya referenced French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's proposal to offer economic incentives to the Burmese regime, and suggested the EU consider how to implement this idea (reftel). Fassino noted that the EU would continue to increase financial assistance "directly to the Burmese people" either via programs operating inside the country or cross-border projects.

FASSINO LISTENS TO VIEWS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

16. (C) EU Political Attache Isabell Poppelbaum told us that Fassino had a steep learning curve when it came to Burma. One of the primary objectives of his visit to Thailand was to gain a better understanding of the regional perspective and the myriad array of actors working on Burma out of Thailand. Fassino met with leading personalities known for their commitment to Burma, such as former senator Kraisaak Choonhavan and Chulalongkorn University Professor Panitan Wattanayagorn. To buttress his calls for support from the region, Fassino held a separate session with ASEAN country Ambassadors to Thailand.

17. (C) To help Fassino better understand the complexities of the world of humanitarian assistance inside Burma, the EU arranged for the UN Coordinator in Rangoon, as well as the directors of the Burma programs for Populations Services International (PSI), Save the Children, and Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland, to travel out to Bangkok to meet with the EU Envoy. Poppelbaum explained that the purpose of that meeting was to illustrate to Fassino that, though difficult, it was not impossible for humanitarian assistance to work inside Burma. At the same time, the relief organizations highlighted the need for increased funding to humanitarian assistance programs, particularly in the health and education sectors, which had all but been abandoned by the Burmese

government. They believed that many local Burmese organizations maintained the capacity to accept increased funding, and asked Fassino to take that message back to the EU.

18. (C) In a final gesture of goodwill, Fassino also met with Burmese political activists based in Thailand. Participants included representatives from the National Coalition of the Union of Burma (NCUB), the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, the Burma Lawyer's Council, and the Ethnic Nationalities Council. NCGUB council member Sann Aung told us that the opposition representatives had a good meeting with Fassino, and that Fassino recounted the results of his meetings with world leaders. According to Sann Aung, while many leaders in the region focused on the need for stability in Burma, Fassino emphasized the importance of pairing stability with democracy. Ledeunff stated that the political opposition leaders told Fassino that they sought dialogue with the regime to work towards national reconciliation, not outright regime change. Fassino later told Ledeunff, however, that he had the sense that the Burmese were saying what they thought Fassino wanted to hear, not necessarily expressing their true point of view.

COMMENT

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19. (C) While Fassino's visit may not have resulted in any major breakthroughs on the diplomatic front, it did prove useful for his own education about the situation in Burma. Our EU and French contacts both mentioned that Fassino was satisfied with the visit in that he had the opportunity to meet alot of the relevant actors. We are not surprised that Fassino and Nitya were mutually disappointed by the lack of substance in their meeting, but this did not represent a lost opportunity, given the timing of the visit -- Nitya is days away from the end of his term as Foreign Minister, and he is unlikely to have much influence over foreign policy in the new government.

JOHN